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May 8th, 10:45 AM - 12:15 PM

## The Marxist Stream of Untouchable

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The Marxist Stream of *Untouchable*  
by Daniel Blanchard

A Part in the Panel Presentation *Studies in Postcolonial Modernism*

Presented on May 8th, 2013 at Portland State University's First Annual Research Symposium

## 1. Introduction

Mulk Raj Anand, an Anglo-Indian author, was born in India and later educated in England where he received his PhD in Philosophy from Cambridge. Anand wrote his novels in English, which was something that subjected him to the scorn of Indian nationalists. Yet Anand felt he needed to appeal to the Indian bourgeois, largely British upper-class that had immigrated to the country during colonization, in order to effect a change. He did see literature as a potential impetus for political change and growth of societal awareness. Marxism, socialism, Gandhism, Christianity and humanism were all known to have influenced Anand's work.

With respect to the study that follows, *Untouchable* was Anand's first novel, published in 1935. He wrote the novel in his late twenties. The story an omniscient narrator relates a day in the life of Bakha, the novel's main character. Bakha is what is known as an "untouchable," meaning he is born without caste, forced to live on the fringes of society, performing the lowliest, yet necessary, deeds of a civilization. His daily duties include sweeping streets and cleaning latrines. It is expected of Bakha to constantly call out, "Sweeper! Sweeper!" when he is walking through the streets so as to alert those around him that they are in the presence of an untouchable. Thus they can avoid making contact with him, contact that would in effect pollute their purity.

At the novel's beginning Bakha has taken a liking to British dress. An officer of the soldier's barracks that is nearby Bakha's outcaste camp, and for which he cleans the latrines, has given him a British uniform. Bakha thus begins the novel in his British dress, feeling superior to his fellow outcastes, revealing something of his initial taste for materialism.

These are the novel's basic precedents. Indeed the reader is immersed in a controversial place and time, India under colonial rule, a nation grappling with the preservation of its Hindu spirituality, and the "modernizing" force of British colonialism.

Given this study's dealings with Marxist ideology, it will be useful to introduce the prominent theorist this essay refers to. Georg Lukacs (1885-1971) was a Hungarian-born Marxist theorist that coined the term "class-consciousness." While a primarily a philosopher, Lukacs was also a literary critic. He gained popularity under the Stalinist regime of Soviet Russia. *History and Class-Consciousness*, his magnum opus, was published in 1923, and is the primary vehicle of this essay's relation to Marxist ideology.

## 2. The Marxist Stream of *Untouchable*

The following study investigates Mulk Raj Anand's 1935 modernist text *Untouchable* through a political-ideological lens that saturated modernity. The ideology of Marxism had taken roots in the Western world by the time Anand moved to England in the 1920s. Marxism then influenced Anand's education, world beliefs and writing. Following the novel's main character, Bakha, through his trials and tribulations, this study investigates *Untouchable* through the lens of Marxism.

Through Bakha's religious inquisitions and frustrations with his experiences as a Hindu outcaste, he comes to realize himself as a class entity. Bakha evolves throughout the novel, from being uncritical of his own materialism and egoism, to recognizing these ethics as unrepresentative of his own real desires. In the scope of this revelation Bakha realizes the ethics he has been striving for are the ethics of the very class and system that dominate his life.

Marxism realizes itself in the novel through Bakha's perspective. His initial condition represents the extreme state of poverty that defines not just his outcaste status but also the

exploited proletariat in a capitalist society. It is immediately discernible that his situation as an outcaste is "under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them" (Anand, *Untouchable* 9). He is completely segregated from society, living among outcastes who all lack identities within the system that subjugates them. Their lack of caste entails their lack of humanity. A brook contaminated with excrement runs through the camp (9). Carcasses of dead animals litter the streets, giving off a putrid odor (9). In all, the narrator recognizes that the colony is an "uncongenial" place to live in (9). Again, the poverty of this outcaste colony envelops Bakha's environment, yet it is readily identifiable with the impoverished state of any unconscious class in the conceptual stages of capitalist conditioning.

Again, the dissonance among the outcastes is comparable to the conditions of the lower classes of capitalist society. Marxist Georg Lukács explains in the initial stages of the proletariat's subjugation beneath the bourgeois, a sense of unity with fellow working class people does not yet exist. He argues it is the proletariat's initial relationship with and perspective of his/her material environment that produces this disunity. This interaction with material he calls the "materialist dialectic" (*Class-Consciousness* 5). In the materialist dialectic the proletariat initially possesses an uncritical perspective of the material objects he/she interacts with. This uncritical relationship with the object Lukács refers to as scientific thinking, a method habituated in capitalist systems of government (6). Again, a paradox arises in that science, a practice managing the discoveries and perpetuations of truths behind the material environment, ultimately misinforms its practitioners. While science isolates material objects as illusions, separate from the materiality of the human being, it does not posit reasoning behind the facts that have historically informed the material objects themselves (6). Scientific thinking enables what Marx calls "reification," which is essentially capitalism's objectification of the working class (6). The

materialist dialectic, on the other hand, understands the continuity between the object and the human subject, allowing the proletariat to have dominion over the material object (6). In the realm of scientific reasoning the forces of production enslave the working class to a cycle of commodification on a fetishized level (6, 49). Lukacs calls commodity fetishization "vulgar materialism," which both in effect are symptoms of the "crudeness and conceptual nullity" of scientific thinking (9). The culmination of these failures of the proletariat in the initial stages of engagement with the materialist dialectic leads him/her to destitution as a class entity. There is no harmony of working class thought at this stage of unconsciousness. Objects rule the person. The person does not rule the object.

Continuity exists between the proletariat's undeveloped state in the framework of the materialist dialectic and Bakha in the beginning of the novel. Bakha clearly exhibits himself as a materialist. He feels as though he has a good understanding of "fashun," which entails his understanding of the "art of wearing trousers, breeches, coat, puttees, boots, etc., as worn by the British and Indian soldiers in India" (Anand, *Untouchable* 10). Bakha's sense of "fashun" is a broken engagement in the materialist dialectic. His thoughts exemplify no reasoning behind his desire to dress like the bourgeois other than for egotistical means. Moreover, Bakha's father notes that the clothes he wears have no practicality (10). They provide him with less protection from the night's chill than the native dress of the outcastes does. This lack of function in the garbs furthers the idea that in Bakha's unconsciousness his "fashun" is fetishized. His materialistic egoism exults in the delicacies of bourgeois dress and exemplifies his unconscious indulgence in the fetishization of the commodity. Because Bakha derives not only pleasure, but also a sense of superiority from the dress, he falls under the stipulations of vulgar materialism.

Furthermore, the image of Bakha in the dress of the capitalist is a striking example of Marxist reification. Clothed in the garbs of the agents of oppression of the society that subjugates him, Bakha represents an objectified subject within a colonized India that is in the process of adopting capitalism. It is important to note, however, that despite Bakha's ready self-subjugation to the colonizer, his participation in this vulgar materialism is a necessary step of the materialist dialectic in realizing oneself as a class entity and achieving class-consciousness.

At the novel's beginning Bakha has no class identity because he has not yet realized himself as a proletariat. He initially runs into the same failures the proletariat does in the early stages of the materialist dialectic. Yet, again, this unconsciousness is an integral part of the dialectic. Lukács states, "Defeat is the necessary prelude to victory" (*Class-Consciousness* 43). In essence the proletariat must be subjected to unconscious exploitation before he/she can realize his/herself as a class entity that suffers communally beneath the bourgeois.

The evolutionary aspect of the Marxist construct is critical in understanding Bakha's progression in the novel. Lukács posits that in Marxism the proletariat must evolve into a communal sense of identity. Class-consciousness is not achieved through sudden radical intervention (5). It is the product of an enduring engagement in the materialist dialectic.

Lukács refers to "historical materialism" as the defining ideology of a class-conscious individual. He defines historical materialism, "The acquisition of total knowledge of reality" (21). Effectively successful engagement in the materialist dialectic enables the subject to procure historical materialism in his or her thought processes. Gradually, through the dialectic, "the intelligibility of objects develops in proportion as we grasp their function in the totality to which they belong" (13). Bakha exemplifies his own involvement in this evolution-of-consciousness

process and eventually shows his growing awareness of the material objects that surround him, their functions and/or their lack of function.

Close to the novel's conclusion, Bakha's thoughts on the "solar topee," an exotic Indian sun hat that hangs in the veranda of the British soldier's barracks, is an interesting specimen of his growing total-knowledge of the material object (Anand, *Untouchable* 102). Bakha has yearned for the solar topee since his boyhood, a time in which his vulgar materialism is in its prime. Examining the hat, Bakha feels those same bygone materialistic impulses to own it finally, though its acquisition entails asking a member of the guard. An insuperable barrier, Bakha fears the request would give the sahibs the impetus for abusing him (102). This line that cannot be crossed, extant between Bakha and the sahibs, represents the like insurmountable line inherent between the proletariat and bourgeois. Through Bakha's continued longing for the hat, and subjugation beneath the sahibs, he engages in the materialist dialectic that gradually informs his total-knowledge of the hat and its function, or in this case, its lack of function. The instance is an explicit example of Bakha's coming to employ historical materialism. His intelligibility of the object is rooted in an historical awareness that has been informed through a perennial desire for the hat's acquisition. His historical awareness informs his understanding of the object and enables him to achieve total knowledge of it. Bakha comes to realize, "How foolish my thoughts are" (104). The narrator describes, "He was slightly ashamed of his predilection in favour of the English dress, but he derived consolation from the fact that he had never made such a fool of himself as Ram Charan did by wearing a hat and shorts at his sister's marriage" (104). In effect Bakha illustrates that he is gaining awareness of his material world and growing to understand himself as a proletariat.



Bakha begins as a defeated character, but his victory comes at the end of the novel with his realization of the pointlessness in his materialism. With this self-realization his material environment comes to be expressed in new terms. The new perspective is most clear in Lukács words: "The self-understanding of the proletariat is therefore simultaneously the objective understanding in the nature of society" (*Class-Consciousness* 149). Bakha undergoes the evolution from unconscious awareness to conscious awareness of his class entity. Ultimately his understanding of the object is rooted in historical materialism, thus knowing the function and representational value of the objects he perceives. Bakha's perspective has become fully developed at this late point in the novel. His class-consciousness liberates him from the colonial presence in India.

### 3. Relation to Postcolonial Modernism

*Untouchable* exhibits several facets of this panel's theme, postcolonial modernism. The novel inserts the modernist mode of expression into the colonial condition to illustrate the deficiencies of Indian society. The British presence in India was incompatible with Anand's vision for the nation. Yet conversely, Anand did not see Gandhi's humanism as the answer. Rather, Anand's solution was the rise of socialism in India. He saw a class-conscious nation as the effective antidote to India's increasing adoption of capitalism. *Untouchable* then promotes this ideology and, as it was written in the colonizers idiom, appealed to the British colonist.

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